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Leading through Reading in Contemporary Young Adult Fantasy by Philip Pullman and Terry Pratchett

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CHAPTER SEVEN

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There's a popular bumper sticker in some areas that reads: "God said it, I believe it, that settles it." It is sometimes paired with another one: "Bibles that are falling apart usually belong to people that aren't." The two combine to suggest an approach to reading and religion that are at the core of my argument in this chapter: they suggest that religious reading is fundamentally anti-interpretive; that reading the Bible or other religious texts provides direct access to truth. In the young adult texts I discuss in this essay, however, the opposite is the case: while texts (of many sorts) may provide access to truth, even spiritual and religious truth, such access requires interpretation just as much as, if not more than, any other kind of reading. The *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Philip Pullman and the Discworld novels featuring Tiffany Aching by Terry Pratchett, which otherwise may seem to have little in common, feature young, attentive, skeptical, truth-seeking readers. These novels, while hardly didactic, suggest through their emphasis on critical reading and thinking that no area of development is out of bounds for the reader; that reading, indeed, enables rather than forestalls moral and spiritual development—a development that emphasizes storytelling and caregiving. Storytelling and caregiving in fact turn out to be related gifts, elements of a kind of feminist leadership that has its roots in critical reading.

In an era marked by religious violence and the rise of religious fundamentalism, it is perhaps not surprising that writers from the liberal West would incorporate an anti-fundamentalist message within their texts. Melody Briggs and Richard Briggs suggest, as well,

that fantasy literature is uniquely positioned to fill the "gap" between science and religion, as the two dominant modes of meaning making in contemporary life:

> On the one hand, science restricts meaning to the empirical, denying people a "sense of their own importance" (42). On the other, religion is marginalized by the relentless march of secularization which relegates religious values to the status of subjective preference. Today's Westerner comes to the point of asking questions about life's meaning and value, and discovers that neither of the culture's dominant traditions gives them the frameworks they need. Instead of finding a way of making sense of things, they find only a gap. If fantasy literature springs in part from such a gap, mirroring the needs of our modern culture, it will also have its part to play in filling that gap. (Briggs and Briggs 2006, 31; quoting Hume 1984)

I will further argue in this chapter, then, that both Pullman and Pratchett are reclaiming the mythic status of their tales, refusing the modern fundamentalism that insists on the empirical truth of religious narrative, and revivifying an older style of reading that focuses on gleaning personal and community meaning from tales (see Armstrong 2000, xiii–xv, for a discussion of the connection between empiricism and fundamentalism). It is a reading intimately bound up with storytelling itself: the protagonists of these texts become leaders by reading, interpreting, and telling stories, modeling the qualities that their implied readers should also be acquiring as they, in turn, read the novels that bear the stories forward.

Young Adult literature has always been controversial, both as a concept and in its contents. Karen Coates writes that YA fiction has often only been recognized "as a house you pass on the way, not a destination in and of itself"—that is, it is defined more by what it is not (appropriate for children and/or adults) than what it is (Coates 2011, 317), while Roberta Trites

has argued that what distinguishes YA from children's fiction is, at least in part, its subject matter: sex and death (Trites 2000, see esp. ch. 4 and 5). These generic definitions may offer a general sense of what YA fiction is. But in contemporary YA fiction—written since the mid-90s—young readers are not only learning about sex and death when they read YA fiction: increasingly, they are learning about reading itself. Contemporary YA fiction is centrally concerned with the power-making potential of reading. Rather than being simply objects of passive consumption, books, texts, and reading are part of an interactive exchange in which teen characters and readers can become active agents within, and critics of, their contemporary culture. In the analysis that follows, I focus primarily on the content of the texts in question, rather than their reception; at all times, however, it is important to keep the implied reader of the text in mind as an active agent in the exchange between reader and text, an agent who may be affected by the depiction of other such agents in the texts at hand. I will return to this question of agency in the conclusion.

Narrative Causality, Destiny, and Stories

To be a spiritual leader is to be both bound by, and to resist, a force Pratchett calls "narrative causality"—a near-synonym for destiny, perhaps, or even for the divine. Pratchett defines "narrative causality" as "the idea that there are 'story shapes' into which human history, both large scale and at the personal level, attempts to fit" (Pratchett 2000, 166). In *Witches Abroad* he writes: "the theory of narrative causality . . . means that a story, once started, takes a shape. It picks up all the vibrations of all the other workings of that story that have ever been. . . . Stories don't care who takes part in them. All that matters is that the story gets told, that the story repeats" (Pratchett 2002, 2). Spiritual leaders, of course, come to embody stories such as the hero's journey, biblical narrative, fairy tales of epic leaders—but the self-aware leader has read

or heard such stories and can, while re-enacting the story, retell and rework it as well. In both Pullman's and Pratchett's series, "narrative causality" is at work, as both Lyra and Tiffany find themselves in the midst of familiar, even sacred, stories. Both are, indeed, the subjects of prophecy, figures who seem to bear the peculiar burden of fulfilling a destiny for a larger community than themselves. In this they may also seem to be stand-ins for their implied readers, or even for all young adults, who bear the burden of fulfilling the future for a generation that is passing leadership on—a generation that may have passed on the stories to them. But narrative causality alone is not a valid substitute for religion, particularly religion in modern crisis—it can seem, after all, simply to replicate the concept of fate or predestination and the concomitant denial of free will. In both Pullman's and Pratchett's series, some kind of destiny seems to be operative, but it is not absolute—human choice, human intervention, and human agency can all change fate, just as human storytellers can change the story. The human characters in the series—particularly the two heroines, Lyra Belacqua and Tiffany Aching—become co-creators within their texts, storytellers who alter their own destinies by re-reading, revising, and reworking familiar tales, and by resisting the extremes of narrative causality. They therefore offer a model of critical reading to their own implied readers. It is a model of reading useful not only for fantasy literature but implicitly for religious literature as well, as I hope to demonstratefurther ahead in the chapter.

For readers unfamiliar with them, it may be impossible to summarize works as dense as Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy or as interconnected as Pratchett's Tiffany Aching novels, a quintet of novels within the larger Discworld series of books (now comprising over 40 texts). Key elements are as follows: the *His Dark Materials* trilogy is made up of *The Golden Compass* (published as *Northern Lights* in the UK in 1995), *The Subtle Knife* (1997), and *The Amber*

Spyglass (2000). In *The Golden Compass* we first meet Lyra Belacqua, a seemingly orphaned 12-year-old girl growing up in a parallel universe to ours, in a version of Oxford that has seemingly split off from our world at about the time of the Reformation. References to a Pope John Calvin, to atomic, electrical, and other modern technologies with different names, and to colonial enterprises that make Texas a country, defamiliarize the reader's experience while still making the world seem recognizably connected to ours. It is a hierarchical and patriarchal world, for the most part, dominated by a Church (always capitalized) that appears to control both the government and the unversity and that, while it shares elements of Christianity (such as a priesthood, popes, and a Fall story involving Adam and Eve) lacks others, including any reference to Jesus. This is the world in which Lyra comes of age. In *The Subtle Knife*, the action takes place in three distinct worlds—Lyra's, our own, and a somewhat indistinct waystation known as Cittàgaze—while *The Amber Spyglass* moves the most freely among a variety of worlds and creatures the least like our own, including a world populated by wheeled beasts known as *mulefa*, who, for all their difference from us, share a creation story that has elements of the Genesis tale. The trilogy as a whole reworks Milton's *Paradise Lost*, recasting the Fall as fortunate and culminating in a war in heaven and earth that restores balance to the multiverse in part through the death of God.

The Discworld series is far different. Often read as a satire of our own world, Pratchett's Discworld is also a comic fantasy: based in a flat world that balances on the back of four elephants who stand on the back of a giant turtle. (The elephants and the turtle otherwise never enter into the Tiffany Aching stories.) The inhabitants, though recognizably human, also include witches, wizards, and other fairy-tale type creatures familiar to fantasy readers. Tiffany Aching is a nine-year-old girl when her series begins. Over the course of the series she ages ten more years,

becomes a witch (first apprenticing to another, older witch), travels to at least one other world, and learns through a series of adventures the importance of taking control of her own narrative—a lesson that Lyra, too, must learn in her own way. It is through critical reading that both become tellers of their own tales, and thus spiritual leaders—and it is to this aspect of both novels that I now turn.

Reading, Lying, and Telling New Tales

Lyra Belacqua, the heroine of the *His Dark Materials* trilogy, is no reader. Characterized early on as a "coarse and greedy savage" who tries to elude her tutors in order to play in the claypits of Oxford, she is an unlikely poster child for critical reading (Pullman 1996, 36). Yet, when she acquires the alethiometer, a "golden compass" or symbol reader, that gives her access to truth—if only she can both ask the right questions and interpret the answers—she slowly develops the skill. While adult readers of the device use books of symbols to help them both pose their questions and interpret the results, Lyra begins by using it intuitively, and then learns the meanings of the symbols as she goes.

Although the alethiometer reveals the truth, Lyra is also, notably, a liar. I'll discuss her lying in greater detail later in this chapter; here, I'll just note that her lying and her ability to read the truth in the alethiometer are explicitly linked. After Mrs. Coulter finds her in Bolvangar, for example, she lies about her journey there:

> With every second that went past, with every sentence she spoke, she felt a little strength flowing back. And now that she was doing something difficult and familiar and never-quite-predictable, namely lying, she felt a sort of mastery again, the same sense of complexity and control that the alethiometer gave her. She had to be careful not to say

> anything obviously impossible; she had to be vague in some places and invent plausible details in others; she had to be an artist, in short. (Pullman 1996, 281)

The "complexity and control" Lyra attains through reading the alethiometer and storytelling are centrally connected. Not only does she feel the same way in both cases, but also in both cases she is telling a story. And while there may be transcendental truths that Lyra accesses through the alethiometer, they are by no means transparent: there is no such thing as a fundamentalist reading of the device. So her readings are stories, stories that give her access to truth. As she is first learning to read the device, for example, she explains to Farder Coram: "I can see what it says, but I must be misreading it. The thunderbolt I think is anger, and the child . . . I think it's me . . . I was getting a meaning for that lizard thing, but you talked to me, Farder Coram, and I lost it" (Pullman 1996, 152). As she becomes more accomplished, the readings seem transparent—she asks a question, and the answers come back clearly—but there is always interpretation involved, as we see most obviously at moments of stress or loss.

Throughout the series, the same language connects her reading of the alethiometer with her mastery of storytelling—or lying—and the loss of one skill late in *The Amber Spyglass* seems directly connected with the loss of the other. Separated from Pan in the world of the dead, Lyra tries to read the alethiometer:

> How wearily Lyra turned the wheels; on what leaden feet her thoughts moved. The ladders of meaning that led from every one of the alethiometer's thirty-six symbols, down which she used to move so lightly and confidently, felt loose and shaky. And holding the connections between them in her mind . . . It had once been like running, or singing, or *telling a story*: something natural. Now she had to do it laboriously, and her grip was

> failing, and she mustn't fail because otherwise everything would fail . . . (Pullman 2000, 384; emphasis added, ellipses in original)

While Lyra's loss of ability to read the alethiometer may seem like a consequence of her "fall"—that is, of her sexual encounter with Will—Lyra herself interprets the loss differently. Reunited with her dæmon in the world of the *mulefa*, she tries to read the alethiometer and fails. "It's no good—I can tell—it's gone forever—it just came when I needed it, for all the things I had to do—for rescuing Roger, and then for us two—and now that it's over, now that everything's finished, it's just left me . . . It's gone, Will! I've lost it! It'll never come back!" The narrator, focalizing Will, notes that "he didn't know how to comfort her, because it was plain that she was right" (Pullman 2000, 490). While it's not clear exactly what she was "right" about—the loss, or its cause, or both?—it does seem plausible that both losses, the lying and the truth-reading, are linked. Lyra has lost her sense of agency, of control, at the same time that she has fulfilled her destiny.

What this suggests is twofold: one, that truth and lies are simply two different ways of getting at the same thing and, two, that that same thing is the larger narrative (destiny, fate, prophecy) into which all the characters of the trilogy are bound. The sense of mastery, of control, of free will (as it were) that Lyra's abilities have given her are, to some extent, illusory, given to her only to fulfill her destiny. This is of course literally true: Lyra is a character in a novel, her destiny controlled by an all-powerful author; as the conclusion draws near, her narrative destiny almost complete, her illusory sense of agency must inevitably vanish. As William Gray writes, "Pullman, the 'Author-God' (to borrow Barthes's phrase) might . . . be accused of exercising the literary equivalent of Calvinist 'double predestination,' with Lyra predestined to salvation and Gomez [her assassin] to perdition" (Gray 2009, 171). Even within the text, though, the link

between agency and destiny becomes clear: Lyra's ability to act, to author her own tale, dissipates as the larger narrative within which she participates shifts**.** Nonetheless, to the extent that she can both read the alethiometer and master storytelling, she functions as a leader, rallying the children at Bolvanger and again, even more importantly, providing hope and direction to the lost souls in the land of the dead.

Stories, lies, and reading work somewhat differently for Tiffany, who is introduced to us from the first as a reader. Confronted with a monster (Jenny Green-Teeth) in the opening pages of *Wee Free Men*, Tiffany turns to the *Goode Childe's Booke of Faerie Tales*, where she finds instructions for defeating it. Soon thereafter, we learn that she has read the dictionary (she has a large vocabulary, though her pronunciation is often somewhat off) as well as the few other books that her family has (Pratchett 2003, 12–13, 30). Much of this reading is primarily informational, and initially Tiffany can take it as directly factual, but as the series continues and she matures, we see her learn not only to read more critically, but to engage with the stories she encounters, reshaping them for her own and her community's purposes. Like Lyra, she becomes a storyteller, engaging with and reworking stories in order to reorder her society.

Rather than rewriting stories out of the Judeo-Christian tradition, Pratchett works in the Tiffany Aching books with the pagan origins of story in England—with fairy tales, tradition, and superstition. In other words, with what are already quite explicitly stories rather than sacred texts. So rather than demystify them as Pullman does with the Christian stories that are his material, Pratchett reanimates what might have been thought to have devolved into fairy tale, legend, and superstition. Unlike Lyra, Tiffany is not associated with a single text or instrument. Discworld is too disparate, and her adventures too multifarious, for that. As I've noted, the first stories we encounter in her series come from *The Goode Childe's Booke of Faerie Tales,* one of

the few books in her parents' sparsely furnished home. And while she finds it useful as a source of information, she is also a highly skeptical reader. This skepticism is initially not productive, however—failing to find the full truth in a tale, she cannot, initially, find any:

> A lot of the stories were highly suspicious, in her opinion. There was the one that ended when the two good children pushed the wicked witch into her own oven. Tiffany had worried about that after all the trouble with Mrs. Snapperly. Stories like this stopped people thinking properly, she was sure. She'd read that one and thought, Excuse me? *No one* has an oven big enough to get a whole person in, and what made the children think they could just walk around eating people's houses in any case? And why does some boy too stupid to know a cow is worth a lot more than five beans have the *right* to murder a giant and steal all his gold? Not to mention commit an act of ecological vandalism? And some girl who can't tell the difference between a wolf and her grandmother must either have been as dense as teak or come from an extremely ugly family. The stories *weren't real*. But Mrs. Snapperly had died because of the stories." (Pratchett 2003, 66–67; emphasis in original)

While Lord Asriel finds the fairy-tale quality of the book of Genesis freeing ("if you include it in your equations, you can calculate all manner of things that couldn't be imagined without it" [Pullman 1996, 372–373]), Tiffany sees the danger in allowing stories that "aren't real" to shape action. Tiffany's suspicions are also aroused because she intuits that there is no place in stories like these for a girl like her. Early on, she asks, "Did the book have any adventures of people who had brown eyes and brown hair? No, no, no . . . it was the blond people with blue eyes and the redheads with green eyes who got the stories. If you had brown hair you were probably just a servant or a woodcutter or something. Or a dairymaid. Well, that was not going to happen, even

if she *was* good at cheese" (Pratchett 2003, 35–36; emphasis in original). Tiffany's gift—and Pratchett's, of course—is to insist that heroism, and leadership, are not limited to those we expect to find at the center of the story: that even the brown-haired nine-year-old can take control of the action.

These are not, of course, religious stories like those that inhibit and constrain the characters of the *His Dark Materials*. Nonetheless, as Tiffany recognizes, they direct behavior—fairy tales may not be "gospel truths" (a term that arises in neither text), but they do influence belief. The people who burn down an old woman's cottage, believing her to be a witch, do not stop to ask the kinds of questions Tiffany asks of fairy tales—although, of course, implicitly they should. Fairy tale, legend, and superstition turn out to have controlling power—narrative causality—despite seeming to be worn out, decayed, obsolete. While Lyra adds reading to her native skill with storytelling, Tiffany works the other way around, learning to reshape the stories that she has critically read, and to retell them with new meanings. Ultimately, however, Tiffany's solution is like Lyra's: to take control of the story, to edit and shape and retell it, a process that goes on throughout the series. As Granny Weatherwax says, "change the story, change the world"—and Tiffany does, repeatedly, both bowing to narrative causality and resisting it (Pratchett 2004, 338). Like Lyra, then, her leadership derives from her facility with story, as both reader and (re)teller.

Re-reading the Fall Narrative in *His Dark Materials*

The most obvious example of narrative causality in *His Dark Materials* comes in a prophecy about Lyra. In a horrific scene near the end of *The Subtle Knife*, Lyra's mother, Marisa Coulter, tortures the witch Lena Feldt to find out who the witches say her daughter is:

> Lena Feldt gasped, "She will be the mother—she will be life—mother—she will disobey—she will—"
>
> "Name her! You are saying everything but the most important thing! Name her!" cried Mrs. Coulter.
>
> "Eve! Mother of all! Eve, again! Mother Eve!" stammered Lena Feldt, sobbing. (Pullman 1997, 314)

If Lyra is, indeed, as the witch says, "Eve, Mother of us all," then we can see the entire trilogy as a revision of Genesis. And certainly in the final pages we get a specific reimagining of the Genesis story in which Lyra and Will come to consciousness, as their forebears did, but with joyful rather than tragic consequences. Despite the "felix culpa" quality of their "fall," however, the story still has its way with them and they choose exile from the garden and separation—much like the joint expulsion Eve and Adam undergo. While throughout the trilogy story both constrains and enables, finally the tale that Will and Lyra find themselves within has intentions for them that they cannot resist. As David Gooderham suggests, the "old myth bit[es] back" when Will and Lyra, like Adam and Eve before them, face "exile" after their "fall" (Gooderham 2003, 170).

By the time Lyra re-enacts the "Fall" toward the end of *The Amber Spyglass*, readers have already encountered two alternative versions of Genesis, although Lyra has only heard one of them. The first, in *The Golden Compass*, changes little from the canonical story but does add the dæmons who have been a central part of Pullman's mythology. The moment of awareness here is significant: after the man and the woman eat the forbidden fruit, "the eyes of them both were opened, and they saw the true form of their dæmons, and spoke with them . . . [but] until that moment it had seemed that they were at one with all the creatures of the earth and the air,

and there was no difference between them" (Pullman 1996, 372). Asriel, reading this to Lyra, calls the story something "like an imaginary number, like the square root of minus one: you can never see any concrete proof that it exists, but if you include it in your equations, you can calculate all manner of things that couldn't be imagined without it" (Pullman 1996, 372–373). That is, for Asriel, this religious creation story is equally "true" and "not-true," rendering the binary distinction somewhat moot. Even in this early scene, then, the novel grants religious story significant value even while rejecting a fundamentalist understanding of it.

The second version, which Mary Malone hears from the *mulefa*, is a significant shift. When the *mulefa* Atal tells Mary her origin myth, two things are particularly significant: first, the story concerns a female, an Eve figure who does not "fall" but comes into self-awareness nonetheless; second, although Atal calls it a "make-like" (metaphor), she also calls it a history; again, like Asriel, claiming for it a significance beyond the literal. As Karen Armstrong notes, premodern people did not distinguish between history and myth: "Historical incidents were not seen as unique occurrences, set in a far-off time, but were thought to be external manifestations of constant, timeless realities" (Armstrong 2000, xiv). The *mulefa* seem premodern to Dr. Malone, no doubt in part because they, too, refuse to distinguish between history and myth. But it may also be helpful here to think of the way feminist theologians have explored the ways in which metaphor can function as an emancipatory strategy:

> Genuine metaphor is not primarily a rhetorical decoration or an abbreviated comparison. It is a proposition (explicit or implied) constituted by an irresolvable tension between what it affirms (which is somehow true) and what it necessarily denies (namely, the literal truth of the assertion) . . . It forces the mind to reach toward meaning that exceeds or escapes effective literal expression. (Schneiders 1993, 38)

The *mulefa'*s story, both true and not-true, both history and metaphor, forces both Mary Malone and, as importantly, the implied reader of the novel into a critical reading position that, as Schneiders suggests, "reaches toward" meaning rather than asserting it:

> *One day a creature with no name discovered a seedpod and began to play, and as she played she—*
>
> *She?*
>
> *She, yes. She had no name before then. She saw a snake coiling itself through the hole in a seedpod, and the snake said—*
>
> *The snake spoke to her?*
>
> *No, no! It is a make-like. The story tells that the snake said, "What do you know? What do you remember? What do you see ahead?" And she said, "Nothing, nothing, nothing." So the snake said, "Put your foot through the hole in the seedpod where I was playing, and you will become wise." So she put a foot in where the snake had been. And the oil entered her blood and helped her see more clearly than before, and the first thing she saw was the sraf. It was so strange and pleasant that she wanted to share it at once with her kindred. So she and her mate took the seedpods, and they discovered that they knew who they were, they knew they were mulefa and not grazers. They gave each other names. They named themselves mulefa. They named the seed tree, and all the creatures and plants*. (Pullman 2000, 224–225)

In the *mulefa*'s story, Pullman retains significant elements from the story of Eve's temptation: a female creature comes into consciousness through the agency of a snake. But this joyful scene carries none of the weight of either our world's Genesis or Asriel's version. Self-awareness

brings with it no shame, but is associated with the creative act of naming (which, in Genesis, precedes rather than following the "fall" narrative). By retelling the familiar "fall" story without a fall, the *mulefa* perform what Paul Ricoeur calls "the task of the hermeneut": they help us by "transferring ourselves into another universe of meaning and thereby putting ourselves at a kind of distance with regard to *our* actual discourse" (Ricoeur 1978, 224; emphasis in original). Of course, in J. R. R. Tolkien's well-known formulation, fantasy literature "recovers" our reality for us, making the familiar new; it seems to me that this is another way of saying that it "puts us at a kind of distance with regard to our" consensus reality, and thus, presumably, to our "actual discourse" (Tolkien 1947, 74). But Pullman's text takes things one step further than Tolkien's formulation implies; it recovers and defamiliarizes stories that form the groundwork of faith for many people. As we shall later see, however, Pullman also reintroduces some fundamentalism—or at least determinism—about narrative even as he calls the details of the Christian narrative into question. Nonetheless, in this moment the novel suggests a way of reading that is open to possibility—freeing, rather than constrained or closed down by the text.

Lyra, of course, does not hear the version of Genesis that the *mulefa* tell Mary Malone, and is not fully aware that she has been prophesied to be "Eve, Mother of us all." Unaware of her status, she leads her friend Will into the land of the Dead, where we see perhaps the most obvious demonstration of her leadership and her storytelling capacity—her refusal to stay within a pre-scripted narrative, and her ability to tell a story that both nourishes and frees the listeners.

In her sojourn with the dead, Lyra tells stories that "recover" (in Tolkien's sense) the mundane reality of the world, making it new: for the ghosts who hear it, for the harpies who overhear it, and for the implied readers of the text, who are brought into relationship with the tale as Lyra tells it. Throughout the trilogy, Lyra has been an accomplished liar, a fantasist whose

ability to lie has been one of her most salient qualities. She lies easily, freely, even—on at least one occasion—"earnestly" (Pullman 2000, 169). When she lies to the people on their way to the land of the dead, she settles into her role gladly: "as she took charge, part of her felt a little stream of pleasure rising upward in her breast like the bubbles in champagne. And she knew Will was watching, and she was happy that he could see her doing what she was best at, doing it for him and for all of them" (Pullman 2000, 261–262).

But in the land of the dead the facility abandons her. As she begins to lie to the harpies, they attack her, sensing immediately the deceit in her words. Only when she tells them a true story, a story drawn from the world she has come from, do both the ghosts and the harpies acknowledge her as a leader, and as a truth-teller. Here we move from engagement with prior tales to a new tale, to her own story, the one we have been reading: Lyra retells in miniature the story of her life, and she tells it with a particular emphasis, an emphasis on the joys of the material world and on overcoming difference:

> Then she told how the clayburner's children always made war on the townies, but how they were slow and dull, with clay in their brains, and how the townies were as sharp and quick as sparrow by contrast; and how one day the townies had swallowed their differences and plotted and planned and attacked the claybeds from three sides, pinning the clayburners' children back against the river, hurling handfuls and handfuls of heavy, claggy clay at one another, rushing their muddy castle and tearing it down, turning the fortifications into missiles until the air and the ground and the water were all mixed inextricably together, and every child looked exactly the same, mud from scalp to sole, and none of them had had a better day in all their lives. (Pullman 2000, 315)

This brief tale does several things: it quells the fury of the harpies, most significantly and surprisingly, and leads the way to a truce with them which holds throughout the rest of the novel. It also, more subtly, predicts the battle that follows, in which former enemies forget their differences to band together, rejecting the tales that have divided them in order to tell a new story of unity—a unity based on a shared celebration of the material world.

That story of unity comes later, however. For the moment, the focus of the narrative is on Lyra's ability to calm the harpies. Unable to do so with her usual skill of lying, she is surprised to find that telling the truth works:

> "when she spoke just now," [Tialys asks,] "you all listened, every one of you, and you kept silent and still. Again, why was that?"
>
> "Because it was true," said No-Name. "Because she spoke the truth. Because it was nourishing. Because it was feeding us. Because we couldn't help it. Because it was true. Because we had no idea that there was anything but wickedness. Because it brought us news of the world and the sun and the wind and the rain. Because it was true." (Pullman 2000, 317)

No-Name's truth is firmly grounded in the material world but has nothing to do with, for example, Asriel's empiricism, which might seem to oppose the myth-making of the Church. "News of the world" comes to her through story (like the "make-like" or history of the *mulefa*), which, in a telling choice of verbs, nourishes and feeds rather than explaining or proving. It is probably worth noting here that witches and harpies are all female, and the *mulefa* we encounter the most often are also female, although they clearly have two sexes. Rather than the patriarchal world of the Church (it's noted more than once that Mrs. Coulter is unusual in her power within that institution) it is these matriarchies or quasi-matriarchal societies that have access to truth

through story. Storytelling is thus linked explicitly here with caregiving, a care that both Lyra or, perhaps even more, Tiffany embodies throughout her series.

Pullman's trilogy, however, centers not on these matriarchal, caregiving societies but on Lyra, who inhabits a far more conventional society—and plot—than these resistant females. Her story-making ability is therefore limited and in the end she seems to be subject to the same narrative causality—the Genesis story of exile—that Pullman's ideology otherwise resists. Tiffany's stories far more explicitly resist and reshape the conventions that would restrict her to either the happily-ever-after of fairy tale courtship (suggested but never fulfilled in her relationship with Roland) or the punishment of witches envisioned by the Cunning Man in *I Shall Wear Midnight*.

Storytelling and the Ethic of Care

The all-female witches of the Tiffany Aching series link story and care even more explicitly than Lyra links them in *His Dark Materials*. But the Tiffany Aching books, as we have seen, initially evince a deep distrust of stories, especially the stories that shape belief. While even in Discworld "fairy tale" means the opposite of "gospel," the *Goode Childe's Booke of Faerie Tales* nonetheless, like a sacred text, directs the behavior and belief of the people who burn down Mrs. Snapperly's cottage. It also furnishes at least some of the monsters deployed by the Fairy Queen in her incursions into Tiffany's world. Like Pullman, then, though working with quite different material to quite different ends, Pratchett refreshes and defamiliarizes stories that may form the groundwork of faith. Although Pratchett does not, as Pullman does, explicitly frame his series' concerns as religious, the language of "sin" and "soul," of caregiving and persecution, is prevalent, especially in *I Shall Wear Midnight*, suggesting an ongoing concern with the functions of religion in society. Learning to read the stories carefully, then, is also a way of engaging with

religious stories critically.Like Lyra, Tiffany Aching frequently finds herself caught in a story not of her own making. In *The Wee Free Men*, this takes a comic turn: brought into the Feegles' clan as their new leader, their *kelda*, she is required to choose one of them for her husband and name a date. This is one of the first times that she uses a story to revise and, in her own way, defeat a story. Choosing Rob Anybody for her husband, she then tells this story:

> "At the end of the world is a great big mountain of granite rock a mile high," she said. "And every year, a tiny bird flies all the way to the rock and wipes its beak on it. Well, when the little bird has worn the mountain down to the size of a grain of sand . . . that's the day I'll marry you, Rob Anybody Feegle!" (Pratchett 2003, 191)

Adhering to the form of their story—she has chosen a husband and named a date—she has also subverted it, by naming a date that will never be. Her story revises theirs and allows her to become their leader without compromising their tradition. And her reading in *The Goode Childe's Fairie Booke* clearly enables this revision, providing as it does the source material for her new tale.

But later re-readings and retellings turn more serious and more complex. In *A Hat Full of Sky*, for example, Tiffany retells the Genesis story—or *a* genesis story—giving the parasitic hiver that has been occupying her mind a new narrative that ultimately frees both of them:

> "Here is a story to believe," she said. "Once we were blobs in the sea, and then fishes, and then lizards and rats, and then monkeys, and hundreds of things in between. This hand was once a fin, this hand once had claws! In my human mouth I have the pointy teeth of a wolf and the chisel teeth of a rabbit and the grinding teeth of a cow! Our blood is as salty as the sea we used to live in! When we're frightened, the hair on our skin stands up, just like it did when we had fur. We *are* history! Everything we've ever been

on the way to becoming us, we still are. Would you like the rest of the story?" (Pratchett 2004, 351; emphasis in original)

This story echoes the narrative movement of the first chapter of Genesis, the familiar "seven days" story that narrates creation from chaos to order, from water to dry land, rather than the later chapters that narrate the Fall, and that form so important a foundation for Pullman. Unlike the story into which Lyra and Will find themselves written at the end of *His Dark Materials*, it is a joyful celebration. And as Tiffany continues the story, she names the hiver (Arthur)—much as Lyra names No-Name the harpy—and in so doing releases him from the "monkey" story of uncontrolled desire that he has been living (and imposing on others). Like the souls of the dead in *His Dark Materials*, the hiver needs a story to free him from an immortality that has become painful:

What's on the other side? asked Arthur.

Tiffany hesitated.

"Some people think you go to a better world," she said. "Some people think you come back to this one in a different body. And some think there's just nothing. They think you just stop."

And what do you think? Arthur asked.

"I think that there are no words to describe it," said Tiffany. (Pratchett 2004, 353)

Tiffany releases the hiver—freeing herself from its influence, and, at least temporarily, ridding her community of the evil it represents—through both story and humility: a story of origins, a humility about the future. Tiffany here recasts science as narrative, potentially suggesting a solution—through figurative reading—to the struggles over Genesis that oppose science to

religion. In the final words of the story—" I think there are no words"—Tiffany then gestures towards the numinous, the unnarratable aspect of the story she is telling.

The scene also demonstrates what we have already seen in her interaction with the Fairy Queen in *Wee Free Men*, and what we see throughout the series: Tiffany's stories come out of a deep sense of sympathy for others. Hers is clearly what Carol Gilligan and others have called an ethic of care: abstract justice is of far less value to her than responding to immediate human need. She explains, "Well, Dad, you know how Granny Aching always used to say, 'Feed them as is hungry, clothe them as is naked, and speak up for them as has no voices'? Well, I reckon there is room in there for 'Grasp for them as can't bend, reach for them as can't stretch, wipe for them as can't twist,' don't you?" (Pratchett 2010, 28). Pratchett's language here has specific biblical resonances: "Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of this world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:34–36).

There is, of course, no evidence in the text that Tiffany has read the Bible, or any religious text. Her own critical reading, as we have seen, is limited to the book of fairy tales in her family home. Yet that reading threads throughout the series, perhaps especially in the reshaped narratives that animate *I Shall Wear Midnight*. Here we are not working with a specific myth or legend but with a pattern: the story of the witchfinder and the witch, the story of frightened people swayed by religious language to turn on the women who love and care for them. As Eskarina Smith tells the Cunning Man's story to Tiffany, it seems that Tiffany already knows it:

> "Imagine a man, still quite young, and he is a witchfinder and a book burner and a torturer, because people older than him who are far more vile than him have told him that this is what the Great God Om wants him to be. And on this day he has found a woman who is a witch, and she is beautiful, astonishingly beautiful, which is rather unusual among witches, at least in those days—"
>
> "He falls in love with her, doesn't he?" Tiffany interrupted.
>
> "Of course," said Miss Smith. "Boy meets girl, one of the greatest engines of narrative causality in the multiverse, or as some people might put it, 'It had to happen.'" (Pratchett 2010, 156)

Not only does he have to fall in love with her, as Tiffany quickly learns, he also "has to" kill her—and in his ambivalent resistance to his narrative (and hers) is born the evil she must contend with. It is an evil, again, with a long history, a familiar story:

> Sometimes you got wandering preachers around who didn't like witches, and people would listen to them. It seemed to Tiffany that people lived in a very strange world sometimes. Everybody knew, in some mysterious way, that witches blighted crops and ran away with babies, and all the other nonsense. And at the same time, they would come running to the witch when they needed help. (Pratchett 2010, 58)

Tiffany actively chooses to take on the prejudice against witches that she notes here, overtly marking herself as a witch with hat, broom, and—finally—even a black dress while she goes about caring for her people. Only by inserting herself into the story the people tell—taking on the role of witch, then subverting their expectations—can she change it.

Both as witch and storyteller, Tiffany's work is explicitly gendered. Early in the novel Tiffany's father, at first dismayed by but also proud of the daily care she offers to the people of the Chalk, says it's a "man's job" she is doing (Pratchett 2010, 28); Tiffany demurs silently at the time, but at the end, Granny Weatherwax says "it seems to us that you've done a woman's job today" (Pratchett 2010, 342). The witches know, as most of the men around them seem not to, that caring for others involves both story and dirt, both the "whizzing about" that is part of every story about witches, and cutting old ladies' toenails—which doesn't make it into the stories but is just as important (see Pratchett 2010, 27–28, e.g.). Not only does Tiffany perform the thankless tasks of caring that others neglect, she eschews a sense of abstract moral justice for the here and now. As Mrs. Proust notes, she is one of those "unofficial people who understand the difference between right and wrong, and when right is wrong and when wrong is right" (Pratchett 2010, 138). Carol Gilligan defines her position this way: "morality and the preservation of life are contingent on sustaining connection, seeing the consequences of action by keeping the web of relationship intact.. . . an absolute judgment yields to the complexity of relationships" (Gilligan 1982, 59). Her care for others occasionally threatens to overwhelm her, but it is, as the other witches see, the center around which her steading spins (Pratchett 2010, 342).

In *I Shall Wear Midnight* Tiffany and Letitia come to an understanding through their shared reading. In an echo of Tiffany's earlier complaint about the fairy tale book, Letitia says, "Hah, I wanted to be a witch when I was little. But just my luck, I had long blond hair and a pale complexion and a very rich father. What good was that? Girls like that can't be witches!" (Pratchett 2010, 236). But, as the novel makes clear, narrative causality is not so strong: Letitia is a witch, and cares for her steading just as Tiffany does for hers. As Letitia provides a pumpkin

head for the headless ghost, she demonstrates the same kind of humility in her magic as we have seen in Tiffany's: a care for the immediate, the poor, and the sick, that recalls the core teachings of almost all world religions, though they are often imperfectly enacted or forgotten altogether by many adherents of those religions. By performing the tasks of a witch, Tiffany reinfuses her world with a sense of the numinous, with a reverence for creation, that it had lacked, bringing into being a better reality than what had gone before. According to Sallie McFague, "In the picture of the mother-creator, the goal is neither the condemnation nor the rescue of the guilty but the just ordering of the cosmic household in a fashion beneficial to all" (McFague 1990, 256). At the end of I *Shall Wear Midnight,* Tiffany is told that she has written the appropriate endings to the stories that have threaded throughout the novel: "Classic endings to a romantic story are a wedding or a legacy, and you have been the engineer for one of each. Well done" (Pratchett 2010, 340). The "just ordering" of the "household," then, is a kind of storytelling—and Tiffany the witch has become the origin, as well as the subject, of her own story. It is also, to bring us full circle, a kind of spiritual leadership. Tiffany, even more than Lyra, develops as a leader in her community through caregiving, storytelling, and critically rereading and re-engaging with the stories that seem to constrain her.

Stories, it is true, can serve as a constraint on the development of human agency: the stories the church tells in *His Dark Materials*, *The Goode Childe's Booke of Faerie Tales* throughout Tiffany Aching's series, set limits and constrain those who see themselves too transparently reflected in the texts. Rather than binding themselves or others through religious story, however, Lyra and Tiffany learn to tell their own stories and so take on agency, liberating themselves and others. That is—to return to the bumper stickers with which I began—whatever God, the Church, the Bible, or other sacred texts may say, it is up to readers to interpret what

they read and to use the language they have gleaned to create new stories that empower them for the worlds they inhabit. These texts suggest that their readers should do the same, reading critically to re-shape the narratives that may constrain, and rejecting the false truths that fail to set their readers free.

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